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Locally-Grounded Research: Strengthening Partnerships to Advance the Science and Impact of Development Research

Over IPA's nearly 20 years of moving evidence to impact, we have learned that **strong technical skills combined with a deep knowledge of and connection to local context are critical to putting evidence to use**. When we look at some of our biggest impacts, from scaling up targeted instruction in Ghana to expanding a mask distribution and promotion campaign (now called the NORM model) to over 100 million people, relationships and understanding of the local context have been critical in moving research to impact.

Strengthening and leveraging our in-country presence as well as deepening relationships has been a key underlying component of our Strategic Ambition. Reflecting this, the majority of our staff is in and from the countries or regions where we work. And IPA staff have made meaningful (and often behind-the-scenes) contributions to many research projects. However, this is not as much the case among our researcher network. A recent analysis found that 27 percent of researchers in our network are from low- and middle-income (LMIC) countries. This percentage is higher than five or ten years ago, but still offers room for growth.

We believe that making research more locally grounded by increasing the engagement of researchers from the countries where our research activities are taking place will likely lead to more policy-relevant and impactful studies. We can make this happen by partnering with more academic researchers from LMIC countries and also by creating more development and mentorship opportunities for our staff to become researchers.



Looking beyond IPA, similar trends are seen in journal publications, conference attendance, and citations. This begs the question, why is more collaboration with researchers in our countries of operation not happening? And how can IPA leverage our position to make our field more representative of the countries where we work—a change we expect would have positive contributions to both science and policy impact?

Listening to a number of local research partners, our staff, and leading Global South economists we think there are three main sets of barriers. First, **networks**: researchers and research institutions from the Global North simply do not know enough researchers in the countries where development research is taking place (this is less the case in Latin America, but is certainly true in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia). From IPA's own experience, where we know researchers from the countries we work in who are interested in pursuing development research—particularly those working or interested in engaging in randomized impact evaluations—they are often saturated with academic teaching obligations, requests for engagement in projects, and constrained in their availability to mentor junior researchers. In cases where research teams have been brought together in a more transactional way for specific projects, those interactions can be at worst tokenistic, but more often, lacking the opportunity for meaningful two-way mentorship and exchange between local and international researchers.

Second, **it takes time and experience to conduct the "business" of research grant-writing**. All types of proposal writing come with a set of norms and know-how that is learned and deepened over time. Research grant writing is no exception. With the majority of development research funding originating from developed countries, researchers in those countries have a distinct advantage in learning to navigate the quirks, preferences, and

norms of various funders' grant application processes—alongside the ability to access and network with funders directly. Writing grant applications also takes time, which can be a limitation for researchers working in institutions with heavy teaching loads. These constraints can mean that strong, locally-conceived research projects do not get sufficiently resourced.

Third, as in all settings, **researchers in academic institutions have competing incentives**, shaped by teaching workloads, tenure opportunities, publication interests, policy influence appetite, and perhaps most critically, “soft” versus “hard” money contracts. For academics in some lower-income countries, university salaries are often expected to be supplemented with consultancy income. In others, the pressures to publish are high for career progression. In each of these cases, the opportunity cost of engaging in development research projects might be too high, particularly experimental research, which is less the norm, often requires long timeframes for results, and is less valued in certain academic contexts.

So how can IPA do more?

Last year, we developed a strategy to diversify IPA's research network to deepen our support for policy impact through local partnerships. This strategy focuses on four core objectives which build on IPA's strengths as convenor, employer, coach, and implementer of research projects. We have set ambitious targets for ourselves and we are prioritizing a set of activities that we hope can serve as a catalyst for realizing our ambition:

- 1. Strengthening the network of researchers in low- and middle-income countries:** In collaboration with global, regional, and local partners, we are holding networking and matchmaking events to expand opportunities for relationship building among researchers, policymakers, and funders.
- 2. Enhancing access to funding for researchers from low- and middle-income countries:** We are revising our standard competitive call management guidelines and offering pre-application orientations to encourage applications from researchers from the global south. We are also implementing regional workshops that cover the essentials of successful proposals, such as writing, budget preparation, study design, and power calculations, and analysis and interpretation of study findings. We are also providing direct support for project development and research grants application through our country offices.
- 3. Developing a pipeline of researchers through IPA country offices:** We are working with our university partners to offer Masters and PhD students paid internship opportunities to gain exposure to research and policy work and to promote authorship of new publications. We are also collaborating with our partners to jointly design and deliver impact evaluation methodological courses to strengthen the academic curriculum on the subject. We are increasing scholarship and research skills development opportunities for IPA staff, who represent a critical source of research capacity across our countries of operation.

4. **Supporting LMIC researchers with research communication and policy**

engagement: We know that research communications are critical for policy influence so are increasing our support to LMIC researchers, with the creation of easy-to-access communications materials.

We have begun a process of implementing this strategy across seven countries in East and West Africa (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zambia), under the guidance of an **advisory committee of leading African academics—Professor Hellen Inyega (University of Nairobi), Associate Professor Eugénie Maïga (Université Norbert Zongo), Professor Gituro Wainaina (University of Nairobi), and Professor Leonard Wantchekon (Princeton University and African School of Economics)**. With their guidance and through continued engagement with our partners, we are confident that we can make strong progress.

As we move ahead with this strategy, we will hold three ideas constant in our approach. These ideas will ensure that we not only undertake the right activities but do so with the right ethos:

1. **Improving people's lives must remain the central goal of our engagement with researchers** regardless of their origins. While our tactics might need to adjust, the goal is the same.
2. **Inclusive and meaningful engagement means recognizing, amplifying, and building connections** with individuals and organizations in our network who are already committed to improving lives through research. We are excited to learn from and build on the collective experience of many of our existing partners and peers.
3. **Making this change sustainably means infusing it into our total operation**, not just as a standalone initiative. This will require internal refocusing of business processes, resources, incentives, and priorities.

We are excited about this increased focus on more locally-grounded research and look forward to collaboration with our partners, including many of you, to make this a success.

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